

Air Force surgeon general: One suicide is one too many

By Leigh Anne Bierstine
Air Force Surgeon General Public
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WASHINGTON (AFPN) – One Air Force suicide is one suicide too many, according to Lt. Gen. Paul Carlton, Air Force surgeon general.

The surgeon general is trying to combat suicides by instilling in every Air Force member that it is a community problem. That philosophy is the basis for the Air Force's community approach to suicide prevention.

"We have to stop thinking of suicide prevention as something only mental health professionals do," Carlton said.

"All of us have a responsibility to our fellow airmen and co-workers," he explained.

"Recognizing when a person is having problems and actively encouraging that person to seek help is a vital part of suicide prevention.

"We lose too many airmen to suicide in the Air Force, and it is preventable," he said.

"Whatever the numbers are, we can never stop being proactive and declare victory. Instead, we must continue our efforts."

Today, the Air Force is using a prevention team called the integrated delivery system that includes chaplains and professionals from mental health, family support, child and youth services, health and wellness centers, and family advocacy, all working together and taking responsibility for enhancing community health and well-being.

To date, suicide prevention efforts include an emphasis on involving and

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training Air Force leadership, and on buddy care and annual suicide prevention training for all military and civilians.

The Air Force also maintains a database that tracks not only suicides, but also suicide attempts.

The Air Force is not alone in its battle against suicide. David Satcher, surgeon general of the United States, described suicide as a "serious public health problem."

Nearly 31,000 people commit suicide annually in the United States. Twenty-one active-duty Air Force people committed suicide in 2000, according to the casualty services branch of the Air Force Personnel Center.

Raising suicide awareness is not enough, according to Lt. Col. Wayne Talcott, who leads the Air Force's suicide prevention team.

"Our pilots are responsible for early signs of problems with their jet engines, so mechanics can intervene before engine failure occurs," Talcott said.

"In the same way, we expect our commanders, first sergeants and supervisors at every level to be responsible for their co-workers and watch for early signs of problems so we can intervene early."

"The subject of suicide is very discomforting for many people, but the first step toward preventing suicide is getting people to talk about it," Talcott said.

Talcott suggest people be alert for the following warning signs that may signal suicide intent:

- Preoccupied with death and dying
- Talk about committing suicide
- Make final arrangements for death
- Trouble eating or sleeping
- Drastic changes in behavior
- Withdrawal from friends or social activities
- Loss of interest in work, school, etc.
- Give away prized possessions
- Take unnecessary risks
- Loss of interest in personal appearance
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs

For more information on what to do if a member encounters someone with these signs, immediately contact an appropriate integrated delivery system representative: the 8th Fighter Wing chaplain's office at 782-4300, 8th Services Squadron troop support center at 782-5205, 8th Medical Operations Squadron Counseling Services Flight at 782-4562, or 8th MDOS Health and Wellness Center at 782-4305.

Wolf's Bytes

I'm proud of you Wolf Pack! We exercised hard last week and people responded in true Wolf Pack fashion. I saw a lot of great attitudes and people eager to do their best. Over the past year we've overcome typhoons, floods, began transitioning to a night flying operation, hosted countless distinguished visitors, and we've always shined when we were counted on the most. We have another hurdle to cross in the Operational Readiness Inspection in March. It will measure what we do and train for every day our ability to Defend the Base, Accept Follow-on Forces and take the fight North.

We're really hitting our combat stride and this past exercise was our best yet. Despite being in Alarm Black, MOPP-4 for extended periods of time, the Wolf Pack remained focused and did their part to deter "enemy aggression" and kept spirits high! Everyone should be eager to show the Pacific Air Forces Inspector General Team just how good we are at performing our mission.

The final test is around the corner, so we need to continue to do our homework. As a Super Bowl champion compiles and analyzes scouting reports and game film, we should talk with our counterparts at other bases who've recently experienced an ORI. I highly encourage people to review the final reports of the ORI battle-tested bases within the Pacific, and even within Air Combat Command. Review the areas the inspectors may grade us on. While I know we're well prepared, it never hurts to continue to do the extra credit and homework in the event of an unexpected "pop quiz" or exercise scenario we haven't practiced or reasoned through.

We need to be careful on several fronts and avoid the trappings we could fall into if we're not on our toes. Never react, think each scenario through. If you receive a written exercise input, read the input carefully and verbalize it to others. Make sure nothing is omitted. By verbalizing your thought patterns out loud the inspectors will be better able to follow your course of action and know you are actively working the situation. Be decisive and always have your Ability to Survive and Operate Guide and Airman's manual on you.

Thank you for your great attitudes and hard work Wolf Pack. Attitude is the key and I thank each of you for choosing to have a positive one. I'd also like to thank the Exercise Evaluation Team members for making sure our people are well-trained and for making the tough calls. They have done a great job of keeping us focused and making sure we're going in the right direction.

Pride of the Pack



Job: 80th Fighter Squadron resource advisor

Follow-on base: Hill AFB, Utah

Family: Wife, Kerri.

Hometown: Butte, Mt.

Hobbies: Woodworking and bicycling.

Words of wisdom: "Do it right the first time."

The Pride of the Pack is nominated by his or her commander, first sergeant or supervisor, or any Wolf Pack member, for outstanding value to their unit and dedication to the mission. To nominate a Wolf Pack member, send a nomination to the individual's group commander.



Tech. Sgt. Bill Butler